BBC

DOCTOR WHO

MALORIE BLACKMAN

THE RIPPLE EFFECT

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PUFFIN

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ABOUT MALORIE BLACKMAN

MALORIE BLACKMAN has written over sixty books, including the much-acclaimed *Noughts &*

Crosses, and is acknowledged as one of today's most imaginative and convincing writers for young readers. She has been awarded numerous prizes for her work, including the Red House Children's

Book Award and the Fantastic Fiction Award. Malorie has also been shortlisted for the Carnegie

Medal. In 2005 she was honoured with the Eleanor Farjeon Award in recognition of her contribution to children's books, and in 2008 she received an OBE for her services to children's literature. She has been described by *The Times* as a national treasure.

Malorie Blackman was recently appointed Children's Laureate 2013–2015.

Books by Malorie Blackman

The Noughts and Crosses sequence:

Noughts & Crosses

Knife Edge

Checkmate

Double Cross

For young adults:

Boys Don't Cry

Jon For Short

The Stuff of Nightmares

Trust Me

For older readers:

A.N.T.I.D.O.T.E.

Dangerous Reality

Dead Gorgeous

The Deadly Dare Mysteries

Hacker

Pig-Heart Boy

Tell Me No Lies

Thief!

For junior readers:

Cloud Busting

Operation Gadgetman

Whizziwig and Whizziwig Returns

For beginner readers:

Jack Sweettooth

The Monster Crisp-Guzzler

Snow Dog

Space Race

1

The Doctor lay on his back with his head inside the TARDIS console. Ace stood beside him, holding an armful of tools she didn't recognise. They weren't heavy but they were awkward.

'Pass me the magnetic de-interlacer,' said the Doctor, his arm stretched up expectantly.

'The what?' asked Ace.

‘The metal tube with the red ball on the end.’

Ace had to juggle the tools in her arms so that she didn’t drop the lot before she carefully extracted the correct one and placed it in the Doctor’s hand.

‘Professor, what, exactly, are you doing?’ she asked with a frown.

‘I’m reconfiguring the chrono-dynamic tensor to have a non-orthogonal phase angle,’ he said as if that made everything clear. ‘Now I need a tachyon filter. Please.’ Once again, a hand emerged, its fingers wriggling.

Ace examined the tools she still held. She hoped that one would be conveniently labelled ‘tachyon filter’. No such luck.

The empty hand waved impatiently.

‘OK, which one is that?’ she asked, frustrated. Give her something to blow up with Nitro-9

explosives and she was fine, but for delicate tinkering with a time machine she was beyond useless.

‘The sparkly tube with the ghostly blue glow inside,’ came the muffled answer. The Doctor’s

fingers were now jiggling so fast they were a blur.

Ace found the tool and placed it in the Doctor’s waiting hand. Her eyes drifted up to the

viewscreen. For over a week now it had been showing the same thing. Fog! Not real fog, of course –

they were in space – but a nebulous, ever-changing multicoloured fuzziness. Every now and then

some piece of space junk would drift into view for a few seconds before disappearing again into the murk. And the TARDIS wasn’t the only ship stuck here. Occasionally a whole spaceship would

appear among the debris. Some were tiny shuttlecraft, others were vast star-liners, but they all shared one thing, the TARDIS included: they were well and truly trapped. The Doctor had already pointed out a number of now-obsolete vessels that must have been here for centuries, maybe even millennia.

Ace was ready to climb the walls. Eight days trapped in this one place was more than enough for her.

'When you get us out of here, will all the other ships be released too?' she asked.

The Doctor popped his head out and looked up at her. 'No,' he replied. 'I'm afraid not. The

Temporal Plexus is like cosmic quicksand. You can pull yourself out – maybe – but everyone else stays stuck unless they work out how to escape for themselves.'

'Can't we do something to help them?' The idea of leaving all the others behind just didn't sit well with Ace.

'It isn't guaranteed that we can get *ourselves* out of this, never mind anyone else.' The Doctor's head disappeared back into the console.

The fog cleared briefly on the viewscreen, and Ace thought she saw a familiar shape. She peered intently.

'I need the quantum stabiliser,' said the headless Doctor.

'Yeah, just a minute.' Ace stared at the screen. As if she had willed it, the fog cleared again and she saw it. A police box …

'Do all Time Lords have TARDISes?' she asked as the tendrils of space fog closed in again.

'Yes,' replied the Doctor. 'Though most don't use them. They prefer to sit on Gallifrey looking important. Why?'

'I just saw another one.'

'Where?'

'Out there.'

The Doctor stood up, dusted off his hands and came to stand beside her, looking at the screen.

Apart from the ever-shifting, multicoloured space fog there was nothing else to see.

'What makes you think it was a TARDIS?'

‘Duh! Because it looked like a police box.’

‘My dear Ace, not all TARDISes look like police boxes. Only this one does – ever since the old

girl’s chameleon circuit got a bit stuck.’

‘But I definitely saw –’

‘Then it was a temporal echo. Space and time are so mixed up around here that what you saw

might’ve been us ten minutes ago or maybe a decade from now.’

‘We won’t really be stuck here for that long will we?’ Ace asked, aghast.

‘Well, not if I have anything to do with it,’ said the Doctor with a confident smile, before returning to the console.

Ace sighed deeply. It was all right for the Professor. A year in the TARDIS probably passed for him like an hour for people on Earth. The TARDIS was huge, and there were enough wonders inside it to keep anyone amused for a lifetime. There was a library, the computers, alien treasures from a thousand worlds *and* a swimming pool, but Ace hated being cooped up, no matter how interesting the cage. She needed to get out. NOW!

Ace turned off the viewscreen. ‘What happens if you can’t get us out?’ she asked, squatting down.

There was a pause that was just a little too long for comfort. The Doctor lifted his head.

‘It won’t come to that.’ He winked. Ace wasn’t convinced. Three days had passed since the Doctor had played his wretched spoons. That in itself told Ace that they were in BIG trouble.

Ten minutes later, he stood up and pushed the quantum stabiliser into the top pocket of his rumpled beige jacket. He gently laid his hands on the console and bowed his head. He might have just been checking one of the instruments, but it looked to Ace suspiciously like he was reassuring the TARDIS.

Then he flicked two switches, closed his eyes and pulled a big lever. The Time Rotor – the glowing glass column in the centre of the

console – started to rise and fall and Ace heard the familiar whooshing, wheezing, screeching noise as the TARDIS started to dematerialise.

'Yes!' The Doctor punched the air in glee and his face broke into a huge grin. Ace was just about to join in with the celebrating when a shudder ran through the entire TARDIS. Without warning, the Time Rotor dimmed and stalled. Complete silence.

'What happened?' said Ace. 'Are we free?'

The Doctor ran around the console checking instruments, a deep frown cutting into his face. After a few seconds he stopped. 'No,' he said quietly. 'I'm afraid we're anything but free.'

Ace's heart sank. She didn't want to end up like the other ships she'd seen, imprisoned like a

mosquito in amber for all time.

'So what's the next cunning plan then?' Ace asked. 'More reconfiguring?' She held out the

magnetic de-interlacer, her eyebrows raised hopefully.

'No,' said the Doctor. 'I'm afraid I've rather run out of cunning plans.'

The Doctor stopped fiddling with the TARDIS and switched on the viewscreen. He stared at it as

if seeking inspiration, then turned back to the console, his hands playing with the ends of the paisley-patterned scarf he liked to wear.

'Come on, Professor,' said Ace. 'You never run out of cunning plans. Are you telling me you

haven't got something else up your sleeve?'

The Doctor's face was a study in frustration. Ace couldn't believe it. Had the Doctor really got into a situation he couldn't get out of? But then his face cleared, his eyes widened and hope flickered within them.

'I knew you wouldn't let me down.' Ace grinned. 'Dazzle me then!'

'I might have an inkling of a plan,' he said quietly. 'But it's really more desperate than cunning.'

At that moment, Ace would have taken anything. 'Which is …?'

'It may be possible to get out of here. The Plexus is gravitationally anchored to a star … so if I can make that star go nova …'

'What star?'

'The nearest one, the one that's just –' he waved vaguely – 'over there … thataway.' The Doctor busied himself again, muttering as he went.

'Er, isn't blowing up a star just a tad dangerous?' Ace asked.

'Not if you do it carefully.'

Carefully? How exactly did that work? Ace knew her way around explosives and even carried a handy supply of Nitro-9 bombs in her backpack, but safely blowing up an entire star was way outside the scope of her imagination. The Doctor spent a few more minutes adjusting, tinkering, checking. Ace felt absolutely helpless. All she could do was watch.

'Doctor, talk to me,' Ace pleaded.

'I'm going to send a phased pulse into the nearest star, but I have to time this exactly right or I'll make things worse, not better,' said the Doctor.

Could things get worse? 'Then make sure you get it right,' Ace advised.

'Thanks! I hadn't thought of that,' the Doctor said drily. 'Well, here goes nothing! Hold on tight.'

Ace grabbed the console, bracing herself as best she could. The Doctor threw a switch.

A blinding light was followed by a sudden series of bone-jarring jolts. Both the Doctor and his companion were thrown to the floor. The TARDIS shook so violently that Ace's head slammed into

the edge of the console – and it hurt. A lot! It took a few seconds for the ringing in Ace's ears to subside. As she slowly got back on her feet, she became aware of a clanging noise – a sort of deep, slow, discordant bonging, like a wonky grandfather clock striking the hour.

'What's that?' she asked, alarmed.

'Not something you ever want to hear,' replied the Doctor, frantically

checking the instruments.

‘It’s the Cloister Bell. It’s what the TARDIS does instead of screaming blue murder when something really bad happens!’

‘Like what? Please tell me that we got out of the Plexus this time,’ said Ace.

‘Oh yes! We’re out of the Plexus,’ said the Doctor. ‘But …’

‘Where are we?’

The Doctor studied the navigational panel. His closed mouth moved back and forth as he chewed

over their dilemma.

‘I have absolutely no idea,’ he finally admitted.

2

The Doctor was still circling around the console fruitlessly trying to work out what was happening when the TARDIS started making the familiar whooshing, screeching noise again.

‘Great!’ said Ace, relieved. ‘You fixed it.’

‘No, Ace, I did not,’ replied the Doctor.

‘But that noise means that we’re materialising and landing, doesn’t it?’

‘Well, yes. The TARDIS is performing an auto-land.’

‘Sorry?’

‘The supernova hurled us across space and time. Now the TARDIS has locked on to some solid-

looking planet and it’s going to land.’

‘OK,’ said Ace. ‘So where and when are we?’

‘Haven’t a clue! That’s why we’re landing – we need repairs. These instruments are misbehaving

so badly that I can’t –’

There was a colossal bump as the TARDIS completed its automatic

landing, then a brief silence

before the familiar electronic burbling noise of the door-opening mechanism started up.

‘Professor, don’t you think you should work out where and when we are before you open the

doors? Just to be on the safe side?’ suggested Ace.

The Doctor was already lunging for a switch on the console, but too late. The doors swung open.

The Doctor and Ace exchanged a look, then turned tentatively towards the wide-open doorway.

Sunlight, intense and bright, streamed into the TARDIS and the sounds of children’s laughter and singing came from outside.

‘Doesn’t sound too scary,’ said Ace hopefully. No matter how often they did this, and how many

new places they visited, this part always made Ace’s heart beat just that little bit faster.

The Doctor seemed less reassured.

‘Hmm! The way the TARDIS is behaving is deeply disturbing,’ he said. ‘It’s almost as if we were pulled here. I wonder …’ The Doctor returned to the console and bent to examine one of the

instruments, so he didn’t see it.

But Ace did.

A Dalek.

It glided swiftly through the open doors and into the TARDIS.

Ace froze. She remembered her last encounter with these death-dealing robots with evil mutated

monsters inside – and not with fondness. The thing was only a couple of metres away and temporarily distracted by the hat stand near the door. But now that it saw no threat from the Doctor’s Panama hat and umbrella, its Cyclops eye swivelled towards Ace. She was defenceless, caught in the open,

halfway between the console and the door. No bombs … no baseball bat … nothing! The iris on the eye-stick widened, adjusting to the relative dark of the TARDIS after the bright sunlight. It started gliding towards her.

'DOCTOR!' Ace shouted.

The Doctor looked up and froze, but only momentarily.

The Dalek hadn't seen him yet, so the Doctor seized his opportunity. He grabbed the quantum

stabiliser out of his pocket, flicked it to the 'High' setting and pointed it at the intruder. The Dalek must have seen him in its peripheral vision, but just as it started to turn the Doctor activated the stabiliser. There was a high-pitched whine and a beam of light shot out of the end, bathing the Dalek in a violet glow. The Dalek's eye and arms drooped immediately and its momentum left it coasting across the floor until it bumped gently into the console and stayed still.

'Blimey! That was close. Is it dead?' Ace was having trouble catching her breath.

'No,' the Doctor replied. 'Just stunned. A quantum stabiliser isn't exactly a weapon.' He stood for a moment looking at the disabled Dalek. 'Very odd! It doesn't seem to have a weapon.'

Surprised, Ace came closer to look. 'Oh yeah, no ray gun.'

Instead of having the usual manipulator arm on the right and a ray gun capable of hurling lethal energy bolts on its left-hand side, this Dalek just had two manipulator arms.

More noises from outside jolted the Doctor out of his analysis. 'We have to get the door closed.'

He moved past Ace and raised the quantum stabiliser again. 'There may be more of them.'

But before he could reach the door, a small crowd of children of assorted alien races rushed in and he was left brandishing the tool directly in the face of a tall, pretty dark-brown-skinned girl of about fifteen years old, who had intricate multicoloured markings of tiny birds round her hairline and running down the sides of her neck. The Doctor tried to peer round her to see if the children were being pursued by metal monsters, but the girl side-stepped in front of him so

he could see nothing.

‘What did you do?’ she demanded. Her expression was equal parts anger and concern.

‘I … er …’

‘Did you hurt him?’ The girl pointed at the disabled Dalek.

‘Him?’ echoed the Doctor. ‘Did I hurt *him*? My dear girl, did he hurt you?’

‘I can see from your ship that you’re a Time Lord, but are you an idiot as well?’ she asked, after glancing around. ‘And give me that!’ She snatched the quantum stabiliser out of the Doctor’s hand like a teacher confiscating a dangerous toy from a naughty child. With another scathing look, she joined the other children huddled round the Dalek, touching it and running their hands over the metal as if stroking a wounded kitten.

The Doctor wasn’t the only one to be totally confused. Ace had never, *ever* seen anyone show a Dalek affection. Before either of them could say anything else, three more Daleks arrived. Two of them approached their disabled comrade, while the third hung back, effectively blocking the door.

Fortunately, none of these was armed either, though their manipulator arms were still powerful

enough to crush a human skull like a hen’s egg.

Now that more Daleks had arrived, the girl turned back to confront the Doctor. ‘What are you?’ she asked. ‘Some kind of thug?’

The Doctor’s mouth fell open. For once he was lost for words.

‘Well?’ she pressed. ‘What possible excuse can you have for attacking a defenceless Dalek?’

Before the Doctor could react to that, one of the other Daleks – coloured grey and red –

approached and spoke to the girl. ‘Tulana, all is well. Sokar is not damaged,’ it said. ‘He was merely stunned by an intense photon flux.’

The injured Dalek had a name? Ace tentatively touched her head where she’d banged it against the TARDIS console. She must have hit

it harder than she'd originally thought. That would certainly explain a number of things, like why the Dalek's voice was so strange. Instead of being harsh,

staccato and coldly mechanical, it was quiet and modulated. It was still electronically generated, but it had a pleasant, almost lilting quality to it.

Tulana looked massively relieved. 'I think he –' she jerked her head towards the Doctor – 'used this.' She held out the tool she'd snatched and the Dalek examined it.

'Quantum stabiliser – very advanced,' it said. The eye moved up from the tool to the Doctor's face.

'I seek confirmation. Are you a Time Lord?' it asked pleasantly.

Having just arrived in a TARDIS, there was little point in denying it. The Doctor straightened up and thrust out his chin defiantly. 'Yes, I'm the Doctor.'

'I am Pytha. Welcome to the Academy,' said the Dalek.

'All are welcome,' chorused the others, apart from Tulana.

The Dalek's eye-stalk swivelled around and looked at the angry girl's face. 'Tulana?' it said,

mildly reproachful. 'Where are your manners?'

'Sorry, Pytha,' she replied. 'All are welcome.' She still managed to give the Doctor another

withering look, though.

The Dalek looked back at the Doctor. 'I apologise for my colleague Sokar,' it said. 'You must have been startled when he suddenly burst in uninvited. He is young and he can be very impetuous when he gets excited.'

The Doctor was speechless. Daleks that were courteous? Daleks that *apologised*?

'If you will excuse me,' said Pytha. 'I must ensure that Sokar re-initialises correctly.'

The Daleks left, two of them pushing their stunned companion ahead

of them, while the children

followed close behind. The Dalek Pytha and Tulana were the last to leave. After a quiet word from Pytha at the door, Tulana turned back to the Doctor. ‘Pytha says that you are invited to tour the Academy later. He says I should come and get you at lunchtime, if that’s OK with you?’ Her tone was biting. Obviously still annoyed, she spun on her heel and marched out.

‘What was that all about?’ asked Ace.

‘Yes, quite!’ replied the Doctor.

‘Can we get out of here? Like *now*!’

‘First things first, Ace. I have to persuade the doors to close before we can go anywhere.’

After some more adjustments, the Doctor finally managed to get the doors to respond, and Ace

breathed a sigh of relief as they closed. Seconds passed as Ace waited for the Doctor to set course for some planet that had no Daleks on it. The Doctor leaned on the console, deep in thought.

‘Doctor, why are we still on this messed-up planet? Something is obviously very wrong here, so

can we just leave?’

‘That was my first instinct too,’ the Doctor admitted. ‘But, as you said, something isn’t right here.’

‘All the more reason to be somewhere else then,’ argued Ace.

The Doctor shook his head. ‘Ace, d’you know where we are? According to the navigational panel,

this is Skaro. But we both know that Skaro no longer exists. And these Daleks are doubly unsettling.’

‘You think?’ demanded Ace. ‘We just got invited to lunch by one of them!’

‘Yes, I know,’ the Doctor replied. ‘You know where you are when they offer mindless violence.

This politeness is terrifying!'

'And what's with the voice?' Ace added. 'Why isn't it all loud and mechanical and menacing any

more? These Daleks sound a bit like wind chimes. Too weird! So can we leave?'

'Ace, right now, much as the other side of the universe appeals, we need answers.' The Doctor

strode out of the control room and headed off into the bowels of the TARDIS.

'What are you doing?' Ace asked, running to catch up with him before he could disappear.

'I'm going to interface the TARDIS computers with external data networks. I need to find out

what's going on.'

An hour later, the Doctor emerged with a thoughtful expression on his face.

'Well?' said Ace. 'Who's been feeding the Daleks happy pills?'

The Doctor stood with his hands in his pockets, looking deeply puzzled. Not good.

Ace tried again. 'The last time I met the Daleks there were two groups fighting each other in a civil war. So is this a third group that's decided not to do the whole death-and-destruction thing? Pacifist Daleks that just want to sit and chat?'

The Doctor shook his head.

'So are these Daleks from before the evil Daleks I met on Earth,' said Ace, 'or after them?'

'As far as I can tell,' replied the Doctor, 'they are *instead* of them.'

'Come again?'

'There don't seem to be any other Daleks, just these – apparently – civilised, philosophical, peace-loving ones.'

‘But –’

‘I’ve examined every archive I can – the *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, the *Intergalactic OmniSource*, the *Citrinitas Net*. As far as I can tell, all the archives are authentic and the TARDIS

databank is the only data source anywhere that makes any mention of evil militaristic Daleks. There’s no record of them ever conquering anyone, anywhere, at any time. Skaro is now the universal centre of civilization, philosophy, democracy and art. It’s like Greece was on Earth from 550 bc, with everyone flocking here to learn.’

‘But how can that be?’ said Ace.

‘I don’t know. Something is wrong here. I can feel it. This must be some kind of Dalek plot –

there’s no other explanation.’

‘That’s terrible,’ said Ace.

‘Oh no, Ace,’ the Doctor shook his head. ‘That would be excellent!’

‘Huh?’

‘That would mean business as usual. Evil Daleks, galactic domination plans, same ole, same ole.’

‘And that would be good?’

‘Oh yes!’

‘So what would be bad?’

‘Bad would be if the recorded history was correct and the Daleks really are loved and respected and a great force for civilisation.’

‘Why would that be bad?’ asked Ace. ‘If the Daleks suddenly became good guys?’

‘That would be bad, my dear girl, because then something would have rebuilt our entire universe with an alternative timeline – but you and I are still able to remember the old one.’

‘How is that possible?’ asked Ace.

‘I have no idea, Ace, but I intend to find out.’

Perched on the edge of a desert, with sweeping views of the distant mountains, the Academy was

beautiful. Daleks and assorted aliens moved along long, winding ribbons of gleaming blue metal that weaved between the buildings.

Lunch was a buffet set up in a plaza quite close to where the TARDIS had landed. Ace didn't

recognise what any of the food was, so she tagged along with Tulana and tried whatever the other girl ate. The smooth blue stuff was a bit salty, and the purply green thing that looked a bit like grated carrot was disgusting, but the orangey brown chunky stuff on the little toast squares was brilliant. Ace had loads of that.

Of course, the Daleks didn't eat, but they circulated, checking everyone had enough food and

making conversation. The Doctor wasn't eating either. He was staring holes in the Daleks and being unusually quiet.

Ace looked up at a huge elliptical building that towered above the multicoloured sand of the desert.

It curved gently and sparkled in the evening sun, tapering to a point high above.

'That's the Medical School,' said Tulana. 'Students from all over the galaxy come to study surgery and genetics under Dalek teachers. The Daleks are the best surgeons anywhere. Their unique

combination of biology and technology allows them a degree of micro-control that nobody else can match. They are also superb geneticists.'

'Oh, I'll just bet they are!' the Doctor snorted.

Tulana gave him a quizzical look. She'd picked up on his tone, but thankfully she let it slide.

After lunch, Tulana took them on the promised tour of the Academy. They strolled between

impressive buildings of glass and metal, and walked along avenues lined with abstract sculptures.

Everywhere they went, groups of aliens some of whom seemed to be barely older than toddlers, or elders several centuries old, sat or strolled with one or more Daleks, learning and debating. There was an outdoor class in nearly every plaza under the guidance of a Dalek tutor – everything from the youngest children learning elementary maths that even Ace could do to adults attending seminars in subjects so advanced that she had no clue what they were talking about.

Normally the Doctor would have been talking non-stop and making bad jokes, but he barely said a word and his silence was making Ace feel embarrassed. She tried to rope him into the conversation.

'The Doctor was saying that all this is a bit like ancient Greece on Earth a long time ago,' Ace said.

Tulana looked puzzled, but a Dalek tutor broke off from teaching and turned to face the visitors.

'Thank you,' it said to the Doctor. 'There are some parallels, but, unlike the ancient Greek humans, we don't have slavery here on Skaro.'

'Still, I see that you're regaling the rest of the galaxy with the superiority of your Dalek ways.' The Doctor's tone was pure acid.

Ace winced. She wondered if the Dalek understood the Doctor's sarcasm.

'We feel that we should share our knowledge, yes. Some advanced races have been a little too

aloof and have missed a chance to share their wisdom with others,' replied the Dalek. 'The Time Lords, for instance.'

Ouch! Being scolded by a Dalek for not looking after other races was too much for the Doctor. His expression thunderous, he strode off – but not far. Tulana stared after him. The Dalek might not have understood sarcasm, but Tulana certainly did.

'Why is your friend being so unpleasant when you are both being treated as honoured guests?' she whispered to Ace when they had nearly reached the Doctor at the edge of the plaza.

'Well, if I'm such an honoured guest, why have they fobbed us off with you as our tour guide?' said the Doctor, overhearing. 'Why are we not being shown around by a Dalek?'

‘Perhaps because they don’t want to be disabled by a photon beam,’ Tulana bristled. ‘Or maybe

because they can sense your hostility. Plus they thought you’d be more comfortable with a humanoid guide.’

There was an uncomfortable silence.

‘I’m sorry, Tulana,’ said the Doctor at last. ‘I’m just not used to Daleks being friendly. This is just

… weird.’

‘You’ve met Daleks before?’

‘Yes, many times,’ the Doctor nodded. ‘And every time, it was unpleasant. In my experience, the Daleks have always been a ruthless bunch of xenophobic, militaristic bullies – even before a self-inflicted overdose of radiation turned them into the mutants that live inside those armoured shells.’

‘That just isn’t true,’ said Tulana, outraged. ‘After the accidental Neutron War caused them to mutate, the Daleks became peace-loving academics.’

‘That may be what you have been taught, but my view of history is very different. Their mutation took them to a whole new psychopathic level. They became paranoid megalomaniacs, waging war on

everyone in sight, laying waste to whole solar systems using every conceivable weapon.’

Tulana looked at the Doctor like he was demented. She’d been angry before, but the look she now gave him was almost one of pity. She looked at Ace, appealing for support against the lunatic.

‘It’s true,’ Ace nodded. ‘The last time I met them, they tried to kill me – big time!’

The expression on Tulana’s face spoke volumes, even if she was too polite to say outright that the Doctor and Ace were lying, or mad. She found a diplomatic compromise.

‘Well, maybe you met a few bad Daleks? Maybe some renegade criminal Daleks?’ she ventured.

‘Or maybe you met some impersonators who were *pretending* to be

Daleks? That would explain everything.'

Ace's mouth fell open. She glanced at the Doctor. His incredulous expression was a mirror image of her own. Tulana smiled and nodded, happy that she had solved the puzzle to her satisfaction and led the way to the Academy Art School.

By the time they got back to the TARDIS, they'd seen hundreds of Daleks, not one of whom was

equipped with a weapon, or had barked an order, or done anything that either the Doctor or Ace

would characterise as typical Dalek behaviour. It was downright disturbing.

'It's a shame I can't show you more of Skaro,' said Tulana. 'It's really beautiful. There's an acid river and a swamp where geysers shoot fountains of mercury into the air. But it would take far too long to arrange transport and to travel there.'

The Doctor's eyes narrowed shrewdly. 'Oh, I don't know about that, Tulana' he said. 'Time and

speed aren't really a problem when you have a TARDIS.'

Despite herself, Tulana's eyes widened. The Doctor wasn't exactly her favourite person, but the chance of a trip in a time machine was mouth-watering.

The TARDIS behaved impeccably and they spent the next hour zipping about all over the Daleks'

home planet. Nominally, Tulana was the guide, but from the way she drank in the sights, it was

obvious she was seeing a lot of it for the first time too.

'Why are you doing this, Doctor?' whispered Ace as the TARDIS hovered over a large lake and

Tulana tried to spot the mutated wind-walker creatures that lived there.

'I want to see what she knows, and what she doesn't,' he whispered back. 'I'm interested in where the Daleks let her go, and where they try to prevent her from going.'

As they flew low over a forest, the Doctor spotted something on the instruments.

‘Aha!’ he exclaimed. ‘A space station in high synchronous orbit. How interesting! Let’s take a

quick look.’ He looked to Tulana for a reaction. ‘Surely the Daleks won’t mind a quick visit, since they’re so open, friendly and democratic?’

It took less than five seconds for the TARDIS to arrive right next to the space station in the middle of a cluster of ten sleek spaceships.

‘Well, well,’ the Doctor said, his eyes narrowing. ‘Dalek galactic cruisers! I wonder what they could be for?’

‘Wow!’ said Tulana as she gaped at the huge ships.

As they watched, a group of Daleks left the station and jetted across to one of the cruisers.

‘Look,’ said Ace. ‘Those ones have weapons. They have ray guns built into them like Daleks

normally do.’

‘Aha!’ said the Doctor again, looking very satisfied with himself. ‘It seems that their mask of pacifist friendliness has slipped. Now you can see their true colours, Tulana. Weaponised Daleks in deep-space battle cruisers. Attack! Enslave! Exterminate! These are the true Daleks I know and

loathe.’

‘Oh really!’ said Tulana.

‘You don’t think that they really need a long-range strike force to do research into surgery and genetics, do you?’ said the Doctor.

It was as if a light bulb went on in Tulana’s head.

‘So that’s what this sight-seeing trip was about,’ she said. ‘I get it now. You think I didn’t know about these ships. You think you’ve discovered a horrible Dalek secret.’

‘These are the real Daleks,’ replied the Doctor. ‘I haven’t figured out the purpose of that charade down on the planet yet, but I will.’

Tulana shook her head, her expression somewhere between contempt and pity. ‘The Daleks aren’t

hostile, but of course they have guns and ships. They’d be idiots not to. Can you think of any race on any planet that doesn’t have some form of army to protect themselves? The universe is full of species that would wipe out the Daleks if they got the chance – and kill all the humans and the Time Lords too, and anyone else who was different for that matter. If the Daleks just stayed here undefended and did research, how long do you think the Sontarans or the Cybermen or all the rest would leave them alone?’

Ace thought that was a good point. The Doctor harrumphed, but he didn’t seem so sure of himself now.

‘The Daleks protect themselves and others, like the people of my planet who don’t have the

technology to defeat races like the Cybermen. Are you saying that’s wrong?’ Tulana’s expression positively dared the Doctor to argue.

The only answer she got was him returning them to the Academy in silence and opening the

TARDIS doors to let her out.

4

For the next few hours, the Doctor grumped about the TARDIS looking alternately puzzled and

worried or irate. Occasionally he’d get a wild gleam in his eyes like he’d just thought of a brilliant plan and he’d rush off to check something on one of the TARDIS computers. A little later he’d stalk back, grumpier than ever.

‘No joy?’ asked Ace.

‘No,’ the Doctor sulked.

‘What are you trying to do, exactly?’ she asked.

The Doctor sighed. ‘I’m trying to find out what the Daleks are up to and how they’ve managed to fool so many people into believing that they’re benign.’

‘So what’ve you found out so far?’

‘Nothing. I’ve checked histories, galactic archives, ancient transmissions that are still spreading out into space. All the data seems to indicate that what Tulana says about the Daleks is true.’

‘So they really are good guys now?’ Ace grinned. ‘Wow! That’s brilliant.’

The Doctor gave Ace a look that could have curdled milk. Ace wiped the smile off her face.

‘Is there anything you didn’t check?’ she asked.

The Doctor grimaced. Whatever it was, he obviously found the idea of trying it deeply distasteful.

‘Well, Professor?’ Ace prodded.

‘The only way to be really sure …’

‘Yes?’

‘Would be to go to Gallifrey and talk with the Time Lords.’

‘And they’d know the truth?’

The Doctor nodded. ‘The Time Lords have unique ways of monitoring the significant events in

space and time.’

‘So let’s do that then,’ said Ace breezily. ‘A quick trip back to your old home planet, a cup of tea and a chat and you’ll know exactly what’s what – yeah?’

From the look on his face, Ace reckoned that a visit to the Time Lords was something similar to her having to visit the dentist back on Earth.

‘Why don’t you want to go?’ Ace asked.

‘Oh, Ace, let me count the ways. They’re old, boring and judgemental.’

‘Is that it?’

‘I’m just getting warmed up! They’re hidebound and they’d rather dress up in their ceremonial

robes and watch the universe than actually participate in it.’

‘Anything else?’

‘They treat me like a naughty schoolboy!’

Ace laughed. ‘But you’ll go anyway?’

The Doctor sighed. ‘Yes. I have to. Every cell in my body is telling me that something is terribly wrong here.’

Ace glanced up at the viewscreen and saw Tulana standing outside the TARDIS. She looked like

she was searching for a doorbell.

‘Doctor?’ said Ace, pointing at the screen.

The Doctor looked up, saw Tulana and reached for the door controls.

‘Are you going to meet the Time Lords?’ Her face beaming, Tulana fired her question at him before she’d barely set foot over the threshold.

Not for the first time, the girl managed to make the Doctor’s jaw drop. ‘How did you know that?’

Tulana’s eyebrows rocketed upwards.

‘It would be fairly odd if you didn’t,’ said Tulana with a puzzled expression. ‘After all, you are one of them.’ She was really excited and rattled on, hardly pausing for breath. ‘It’s so weird. I’ve been learning all about the Time Lords for years, then I meet you and now I get to meet loads more Time Lords.’

‘You can’t come with us, Tulana,’ frowned the Doctor.

‘You can’t really stop me.’

‘I won’t take you.’

‘You don’t have to take me, I’ll go by myself.’

‘And how will you manage that?’ the Doctor asked.

Tulana raised a distinctly unimpressed eyebrow. ‘I’ll. Walk. There?’

‘Walk?’ said the Doctor. ‘To Gallifrey?’

‘No,’ said Tulana incredulously. ‘To the Great Hall in the Assembly Building. The High Council of the Time Lords arrived there about ten minutes ago.’

‘The High Council came *here*?’ The Doctor sounded like he was being strangled. ‘All of them?’

‘Yes! They’ve come to officially thank the Daleks for operating on the Lord President last month to remove a micro-aneurysm from his brainstem.’

The Doctor’s jaw practically hit the console.

‘The Time Lords brought the Lord President here for surgery?’ asked Ace.

‘Oh no, he was far too ill to travel. They invited a Dalek team to Gallifrey. But they’re all here now.’ And she strolled out of the TARDIS again.

Ace looked at the Doctor. He wore an expression she’d never seen before.

‘Come on then. Let’s go see your Time Lord buddies,’ said Ace.

‘There’s no point.’ The Doctor’s voice was flat and lifeless. He sounded defeated.

‘Why not? You said the Time Lords monitor everything. You said they’d know what was going on.

And now you’ve got a whole bunch of them right round the corner.’

‘I’m afraid it won’t do any good.’

‘Why not?’

‘I thought this was a Dalek plot, but it’s much worse than that. I thought that the Time Lords were just keeping their heads down the way they usually do. Sitting back in splendid isolation and not interfering.’

‘But?’

‘But there is no way that they’d invite hostile Daleks to visit Gallifrey. It would be like the hens inviting a skulk of foxes around for afternoon tea.’

‘A what of foxes?’

‘A skulk, my dear Ace, is the collective noun for a group of foxes,’ said the Doctor. ‘But now is not the time for an English lesson.’

‘Thank goodness for that! So why has this visit from the Time Lords put your nose so out of joint?’

‘It means that this change to the universe is real and huge. And any changes on this scale that even the Time Lords don’t know about are dangerous and must be the result of some very powerful force or entity that has changed things.’

‘Even more powerful than the Daleks and the Time Lords?’

The Doctor nodded, his expression grim.

Ace couldn’t believe it. ‘Well, can you fix it?’

‘This strikes me as something way beyond my capabilities,’ the Doctor admitted. ‘We, like the

universe, are in big trouble.’

5

That afternoon was peculiar, to say the least. Ace had never seen the Doctor in a stranger mood. From the frown lines creasing his face, he was obviously still deeply troubled, but at least he wasn’t quite as jittery. The fact that the Daleks weren’t just pretending to be agreeable but actually *were* meant that he didn’t have to worry about some kind of imminent ambush.

Ace and the Doctor strolled through the Academy, exchanging pleasantries with Daleks who

always stopped to say good afternoon or to ask the Doctor’s advice on their research. And he helped.

The Doctor started talking to the Daleks and treating them as fellow scientists. But he never lost his watchful, worried expression.

In the early evening, with the dying light of the setting sun making the tops of the distant mountains look like they were on fire, Tulana found the Doctor and Ace admiring the view.

‘I hear you’ve been having conversations with Daleks instead of

zapping them. What changed?'

asked Tulana.

'These Daleks aren't like any I've ever met before,' the Doctor admitted. 'There can be only one explanation. This is some kind of alternative timeline, very different from the one I know.'

'I was never any good at temporal physics – it gives me a headache.' Tulana pulled a face.

'Nevertheless, for whatever reason, the universe has changed,' said the Doctor. 'Some things are better, some things aren't. The planet Sussashia Four has been destroyed so the reticulated sheep of Chonev are now extinct. The Sontarans won the battle of Kharax Rift, the Suxora Empire never fell, but the Kligoric Imperium did. The list goes on and on.'

'And what caused all that to be different?'

'I don't know yet,' he replied quietly, staring across the plaza at a couple of Daleks allowing themselves to be pushed around by a number of chortling young aliens on a nursery outing.

'But you think the Daleks are responsible, don't you?' Tulana said.

'I wouldn't put it past them. They are immensely advanced technologically, and they're one of the most devious and dangerous races I've ever met.'

'As far as I'm concerned, you're just a man making up stories.' Tulana shook her head. 'You can tell tall tales all day about planets that were destroyed and sheep that became extinct and alternative universes in which Daleks are evil. But that's all they are – stories. I live in *this* universe, and the Daleks are my friends. And the one who is a narrow-minded, inflexible, xenophobic bigot is you!'

And with that she stormed off.

Ace watched her go, and then turned to the Doctor. 'How come every single person, including the Time Lords, thinks that the Daleks are cute and fluffy, but you and I can still remember them doing bad stuff?'

'Good question, Ace,' said the Doctor. 'Something obviously happened while we were trapped in

the Temporal Plexus. Some cataclysmic event altered history, but we were shielded from its effects by the Plexus.'

'Wouldn't that have to be something enormous?'

'Not necessarily. If you make a tiny change at just the right moment in time, then everything else follows naturally, like a ripple effect.'

'The universe can change like that?' asked Ace. 'I mean, the whole thing?'

'It's incredibly rare – but it happens.'

'And then what?'

'Someone has to fix it.'

'Who?'

'The Time Lords, usually.'

'The Time Lords don't think there's a problem.'

'One of them does!'

'Could it be that you're being … prejudiced?'

'I am not!' the Doctor said, scandalised.

'Are you sure? You pride yourself on your open mind and your live-and-let-live attitude, but when it comes to the Daleks you're as single-minded as they are. You told me once that there could be an infinite number of timelines, each subtly different from the next. But you refuse to believe in any timeline in which the Daleks might not be evil. Face it, Doctor, when it comes to the Daleks, you're as intolerant as the rest of us.'

'I most certainly am not,' spluttered the Doctor. 'I just know what they're capable of. That doesn't change, not in any timeline.'

'See what I mean? I rest my case!'

The Doctor opened his mouth to argue, but then he paused. 'You're right. I don't like them. The faint whiff of ozone when they move makes the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. I hate the silent way they glide about. I hate having hundreds of years of memories of every evil, rotten, violent, tyrannical, genocidal plot they've ever

conceived.'

'Then maybe you need to stop living in your memories and open your eyes and start living in this world,' Ace told him. And with that she walked off to catch up with Tulana, leaving the Doctor

gazing at a group of children sitting cross-legged round a Dalek, listening to it telling them a spooky story.

6

The next morning, Ace was jolted awake by her bed shaking violently. Unnerving sounds filled the TARDIS and it pitched and juddered like it was caught in a tornado. Ace ran to find the Doctor. When she arrived in the control room, she skidded to a halt and gawped.

The console was very nearly on the ceiling, raised up on a glowing white pedestal. The floor was half missing, the other half was covered in tools and Ace could only just see the Doctor's head as he crawled around, busily doing goodness only knew what.

'Doing a spot of redecorating?' she asked as she island-hopped carefully across the room.

'I'm converting the TARDIS into a Vortiscope.'

'A whatiscope?'

'A Vortiscope. It's a way of examining the time vortex and –' He stopped. 'The point is that it will allow me to determine the coordinates of the initial space-time dislocation.'

Ace could see he was excited. For the first time in ages, he was enthusiastic again. Of course, she didn't have a clue what he was talking about. 'A space-time dislocation sounds painful!'

The Doctor smiled. 'Think of space and time as a lake. We know that someone has changed the

shape of it, put in new fish, new plants, changed its depth.'

'OK …'

'But they had to start somewhere. There had to be a first change: the first new fish they dropped in the water.'

'And?'

‘That would have caused ripples.’

Ace finally got it. ‘So you can tell –’

‘– where the ripples started, which will confirm once and for all if it was the Daleks who were responsible for this changed universe! Ah! Sometimes I amaze even myself!’ the Doctor finished

happily.

‘And when you find out it wasn’t?’ said Ace.

The Doctor waved the magnetic de-interlacer in her direction. ‘Let’s not count our chickens!’

‘I know the Daleks didn’t cause this, Professor. And, when you confirm that, then we can stay put –

right?’

After a moment’s thought, the Doctor said carefully, ‘If I’m mistaken, if there’s nothing

fundamentally wrong with this universe, then we’ll stay … for a while.’

It took most of the day. Ace offered to help, but when the Doctor said no for the third time she went to see Tulana’s room at the Academy instead. After watching the Time Lords depart, they spent the day swapping experiences and having a good laugh. They had so much in common that Ace knew she’d

made a good friend. She didn’t have too many of those.

‘Ace, what are your plans for the future?’ Tulana asked as they sat sipping their sludgies, which resembled thick grey gel, but tasted like mangoes and passion fruit back on Earth.

‘No idea,’ Ace shrugged, before licking her lips. ‘Travel and have adventures, I guess. What about you?’

Tulana said without hesitation, ‘I want to be a force for good, a voice for peace – the way the Daleks have taught me.’

Ace could only look on in admiration. ‘Well, Tulana, if anyone can do it, it’s you.’

They shared a smile and returned to their sludgies.

When Ace got back to the TARDIS, the control room still looked like a bomb had hit it. The console had been lowered again, but not all the way. The Doctor was standing on tiptoe to see what controls he was operating. Leaving the doors open, she headed over to him.

‘Well?’ she said. ‘Have you finished building your ripple-detector?’

The Doctor stared intently at the instruments. Slowly, he turned to Ace. ‘Yes, I have.’

‘And?’

‘I know what caused the problem.’

Ace stared then glared at him. ‘Well? Don’t keep me in suspense.’

‘I did.’

‘You did what?’

‘I caused all this,’ said the Doctor.

Ace’s eyes widened in shock. ‘How?’

‘You were right about seeing a second TARDIS in the Plexus, but it was more than just a temporal echo. I think it was us, but at two different points in time existing simultaneously within the Plexus.

When I created the supernova to get us out, the counter-shock looped through the Plexus and tangled the timelines of both TARDISes, twisting them together. And then when all that energy from both ships was released, this alternative timeline was created.’

Ace blinked rapidly as she tried to take it in. ‘Hang on. So that means there’ll be no more Dalek invasions? That’s a good thing – right?’

If anything, the Doctor looked less happy now than before. He slowly shook his head. ‘I’ve

changed everything.’

‘Yeah, but you change things all the time,’ Ace pointed out. ‘You go backwards and forwards in

time, meddling with stuff, overthrowing tyrants and sabotaging alien invasions.'

'This is different,' the Doctor said. 'This isn't a minor change in some quiet corner. This is a total rewrite of the history of everything – and it has to be corrected.'

'You want to change all this?' asked Ace, horrified.

'I have to!'

'But why? This universe is OK. It may not be the way you and I remember it, but what gives you

the right to say that this particular change is wrong?'

'Because I'm a Time Lord.'

'Oh, excuse me!'

'That's a better reason than you might think.'

'And yet the other Time Lords don't seem bothered. So you're not just smarter than the Daleks and Tulana, you're smarter than all the other Time Lords too?'

'Don't you think I've thought about this?' the Doctor argued. 'I know how it looks, but this universe is flawed.'

'It's not. It's working! The Daleks are fantastic! All these people are happy and productive. You can't just flick some Time Lord switch and send everything back to the way it was. That isn't fair.'

'Ace, this universe shouldn't exist.'

'But it *does*! You're doing this because you hate the Daleks. You've always hated them. You think that they don't deserve to thrive in this universe or any other. You're just some arrogant Time Lord with a petty god complex, punishing them for all time.'

The Doctor ran an agitated hand through his hair. 'This isn't arrogance or elitism, I promise. I don't think my opinion on this situation is better because I'm a lot older than you or because I have a monstrous ego, it's because I'm a Time Lord. For you, time is waves on a beach that you dip a toe into. For me it's a whole ocean, all the way from coast to coast and from the surface to the ocean floor. I feel time in the very core of my being in a way that you never can. Some things

are not meant to be. Some changes are too fundamental; they threaten reality itself. These philosophical Daleks aren't a problem in themselves, but they are a symptom of a universe that has gone terribly wrong –

because of *me*.'

'OK, so things used to be different. So what? Why can't you just keep this universe? Nice Daleks –

what's the problem? In lots of ways, this new universe is better than the old one.'

'No, Ace, this universe is *wrong*. There's a basic design flaw at its very heart. At this moment, I'm the only one who can feel it, but the cracks are already there, and they'll get worse. By the time the rest of the Time Lords catch on, it'll be too late to repair the damage.'

'Says who? You?'

'Ace, you'll just have to trust me on this.'

'But what if we hadn't been in the Plexus? Then nobody would know there was a problem.'

'Don't you understand? Our escape from the Plexus caused the problem in the first place,' said the Doctor. 'I created this mess. It's up to me to sort it out.'

'And how're you going to do that?'

'We need to get back to the Plexus,' said the Doctor.

Ace blinked like a stunned owl. 'We only managed to escape from that thing by the skin of our

teeth. And now you want us to go *back*?'

'We have no choice.'

'There's always a choice. You taught me that,' Ace argued.

'But the choice in this case is either do nothing or put things right,' said the Doctor. 'And believe me …'

A strange vibration rippled beneath Ace's feet, followed closely by another, and another. Each

ripple was progressively stronger.

‘Professor, d’you feel that?’ Ace frowned.

‘Of course I do,’ the Doctor retorted.

‘What is it?

The Doctor checked the console. Stunned disbelief swept across his face. ‘It wasn’t meant to

happen yet,’ he muttered, racing round the console to check yet more readings.

‘What wasn’t?’

‘I told you that this universe was inherently unstable,’ said the Doctor. ‘I just didn’t expect the space-time decay to happen quite this quickly.’

‘English please,’ Ace begged.

‘This universe is already tearing itself apart,’ said the Doctor. ‘I thought it might take decades, possibly even a century or two before it got this bad, but the rate of decay is obviously exponential.’

At Ace’s blank look, he explained, ‘Growing rapidly bigger and faster at an alarming rate.’

As if to underline his words, the ground beneath them began to lurch. Shock waves rocked the

TARDIS violently back and forth as if it was being tossed on a stormy sea. And then the waves

settled into an eerie stillness.

‘Is it over?’ asked Ace, alarmed.

‘No,’ said the Doctor grimly. ‘It’s only just beginning.’

Without warning, Pytha appeared at the TARDIS door, but he was not alone. Daleks stood beside

and behind him for as far as Ace could see.

Ace's heart began to hammer in her chest. For all her talk, the sight of so many Daleks in front of the TARDIS doors made her nervous, to say the least.

'Professor, we have company,' said Ace.

'I know. I see them.'

'Doctor, we require your assistance.' That note in Pytha's voice was the closest Ace had ever

come to hearing desperation from a Dalek.

'I'm a tad busy trying to keep the TARDIS upright,' said the Doctor, initialising the stabilisers.

'Our long-range deep-space scans are reporting anomalies.'

The Doctor's head whipped up. 'What kind of anomalies?'

'Distant star systems that have begun to … disappear. This is, of course, impossible, but we have checked our instruments and found no malfunctions. And there has been a worrying increase in solar activity from our own sun. We require your presence in the astrophysics observatory. We seek your insight.'

Just at that moment, the ground heaved again.

'I'll be right with you,' said the Doctor. 'I need to sort out something first.'

'We will wait and accompany you to the observatory,' said the Dalek. 'Time is of the essence.'

'No need. I know the way. You all go and I'll meet you there,' said the Doctor. 'Don't worry,

Pytha. I'll fix this, I promise. Trust me.'

The Daleks turned *en masse* and rolled away. Moments later the Doctor slammed shut the TARDIS

doors. 'We need to get out of here. *Now!* ' he hissed.

'You're not just going to abandon them, are you?' said Ace, appalled. 'You promised to help.'

‘Ace, don’t you get it? The stars in this universe are beginning to blink out. And, believe me, when Skaro’s star bites the dust, we don’t want to be anywhere near here.’

‘But, Professor –’

‘Listen to me,’ the Doctor interrupted. ‘We need to get back to the Plexus before that’s wiped out too, or we’ll blink out of existence just like everything and everyone else.’

9

The Doctor ducked under the console and started recalibrating the quantum synchroniser – at least, that was Ace’s wild guess.

‘Aren’t you going to at least warn the Daleks?’ she asked.

‘No time. Besides, what good would it do?’ said the Doctor. ‘Once I’ve recalibrated our long-

range sensors, we’re out of here. We need to get back to the Plexus to reverse all this.’

‘You promised Pytha you’d fix things.’

‘And I will, just not from here.’

‘But wouldn’t it be better to stay and try to sort out the problem alongside the Daleks? Surely working together you could find a solution?’ Ace wasn’t ready to give up on this universe. Not yet.

‘Ace, I know it’s hard, but you have to let go of this timeline. It isn’t right – and it isn’t ours.’

‘If it was, would you work harder to save it?’

The Doctor sighed. ‘I don’t like this any more than you do, but the only way to save the universe is to put it back the way it was.’ The Doctor shook his head, his lips twisting with regret. ‘Ace, you may not believe this but I wanted to be wrong about this universe. I really did.’

Ace activated the viewscreen. Daleks were moving quickly among the other aliens. It looked like they were trying to reassure everyone. Ace squatted down, one question burning its way through her mind. ‘Professor, what happens to Tulana if you reverse everything?’

‘Even a Time Lord can’t know the fate of every person in the universe.’

Ace didn't miss the way the Doctor couldn't quite look her in the eye. 'What do you think will

happen?' she asked.

There was a pause. The Doctor finally sighed. 'Tulana is a native of the planet Markhan.'

'So?'

The Doctor shuffled evasively.

'What aren't you telling me?' Ace persisted.

'About two hundred years ago there was a plague on that planet. It was started by the Daleks as a prelude to an invasion.'

'How many died?'

'All of them, Ace. They all died. The Markhan Genocide is one of the Daleks' greatest atrocities.'

'So if we put things back to the way they were …?'

'Tulana won't exist,' the Doctor confirmed.

'No …' Ace felt sick. She straightened up, immediately followed by the Doctor who lowered the

console to its normal position. Ace searched the viewscreen, trying to spot her friend. 'Doctor, couldn't I just say goodbye to her? Please? I'll be quick.'

'That's not a good idea,' said the Doctor gently. 'For all kinds of reasons.'

Ace watched as anxious students from a vast number of different star systems huddled round the

Daleks, seeking answers that only the Doctor could provide. On the entrance ramp to the astrophysics building, Ace saw Tulana and some of her friends having an animated conversation with a Dalek. Ace blinked rapidly to ease the stinging in her eyes and then nodded briefly.

For the first time, travelling with the Doctor was making her eyes leak.

‘Uh-oh!’ The Doctor was scrutinising the console, his expression beyond worried. ‘Time to

skedaddle, I think. Hold on!’

Ace only just had time to grab hold of one of the console supports before the TARDIS jolted as it dematerialised. ‘So we’re heading back to the Plexus?’

‘Yes.’

‘To *fix* things?’

‘Yes.’

‘If what we’re doing is right, why doesn’t it feel that way?’

The Doctor had no answer.

10

‘How do we get back to the Plexus? I thought the whole thing about it was that you couldn’t work out where you were or how to navigate in there?’

‘Normally, yes, but in this case, we’re simply backtracking to where we’ve already been twice

before.’

Ace sighed. ‘Doesn’t all this time-travel stuff make your head hurt?’

‘Frequently!’

‘Hold on a second,’ said Ace. ‘If this whole mess was caused by two TARDISes getting tangled

up, aren’t we now adding a third TARDIS?’

‘No, because I realise now that *we* were the other TARDIS that you saw when we were originally stuck in the time vortex. I thought what you saw was just a temporal echo or an image from the Plexus time loop, but I was wrong. That second TARDIS was *us* re-entering the Plexus, so at least I know we’ll find our way back into it. And, once there, I’m going to have to pick the exact right moment to restore the chrono-dynamic parity. I have to make sure that the other TARDIS gets free without

altering the universe to do it.'

'And how will you do that?'

'The exact moment the other TARDIS targets the star, I'll put us in the way and target it with

intermittent chrono-dynamic pulses. That should provide them with enough energy to break free

without destroying the star.'

'What about us? Could we get stuck again?'

'If I time it exactly right, the timeline of the two TARDISes will merge into one and emerge from the Plexus unscathed. But if I miscalculate, I could destroy the TARDIS.'

'Which one?'

'Both of them.'

Sorry she'd asked, Ace swallowed hard.

The Doctor ran his hands over the controls and the TARDIS screeched and wheezed and

reappeared in the Plexus, the one place in the universe Ace never wanted to see again. The Doctor switched on the viewscreen and the familiar image of a police box appeared briefly.

'So that's us, before you blew up the star?'

The Doctor nodded. 'About one minute before – if my calculations are correct.'

'And you're absolutely, totally, for-definite sure that this is the only way?'

'Yes. And once we're out of the Plexus, I've preset coordinates to our next destination.'

The sixty seconds dragged by. Ace stared at the other TARDIS on the viewscreen, and thought

about Tulana and peaceful Daleks and a universe that the Doctor said should never have existed.

‘Here goes!’ the Doctor shouted.

There was the blinding flash, which took Ace by surprise even though she was expecting it. The

force lifted her off her feet before slamming her back down again. Forewarned, Ace knew what was going to happen – a wild, crazy, uncontrolled flight followed by a bone-jarring halt. This time the Doctor was prepared too. He brought the TARDIS under control almost at once. They’d escaped the Plexus, but had the Doctor’s plan worked? Had the universe been restored to ‘normal’? Through the viewscreen Ace saw space debris – asteroids, some the size of continents back on Earth, and vast chunks of rock floating before them.

‘Where are we?’ she asked.

But before the Doctor could confirm their exact location, a ship appeared on the screen and swung round in a graceful arc to point head-on at the TARDIS.

‘Aha!’ said the Doctor.

There was burst of static, before a harsh, grating voice filled the control room.

‘ *YOU HAVE INVADED OUR SPACE. YOU – WILL – BE – EXTERMINATED!* ’

Ace shuddered as she recognised the voice, and watched as two missiles streaked away from the

battle cruiser, heading straight towards the TARDIS. There was no gentleness now – all trace of friendliness gone. There was no attempt at diplomacy or debate. These were the Daleks the Doctor and Ace knew only too well – the merciless killing machines that had burned a thousand planets and enslaved half the galaxy.

‘Ah yes, the Daleks I know and detest, still protecting what they feel is their part of the galaxy, even though there’s nothing here but rock. The universe makes sense again,’ said the Doctor as he set the controls to allow them to slip away into space and time before the missiles could hit their target.

‘Professor, where is this?’

‘Skaro – or what’s left of it. There’s always a Dalek battler cruiser or two in the vicinity.’

‘You set our destination for Skaro?’ Ace asked, astounded.

‘Just to make sure that things were back to normal,’ grinned the Doctor.

Ace watched the missiles approach. The Doctor threw a switch with a flourish and the image of the Dalek ship and the missiles started to fade from view as the TARDIS dematerialised.

Even as they slipped away, a Dalek voice grated on triumphantly. ‘ *DETONATION IN 10 RELS.*

YOU CANNOT ESCAPE.’

The viewscreen faded to black, and the echo of the Dalek’s last strident, grating taunt died away.

‘ *ALL ENEMIES OF THE DALEKS MUST DIE …*’

‘So Professor, Tulana never even got a chance to be born,’ said Ace, her eyes glistening. ‘The

Daleks are back to being murderous psychos. This is the universe as you know and understand it. But is it really an improvement?’

The Doctor stared at the screen. The view was star-filled now and peaceful. His hands gripped the edges of the console so tightly that his knuckles were white. ‘Ace, we experienced something I

thought could never happen, in any timeline. Peaceful Daleks who were a force for good. Maybe, just maybe, in time that will happen in this universe too.’

‘D’you really think so?’ said Ace.

‘A few days ago, I would’ve said no without hesitation,’ the Doctor admitted. ‘But now all we can do is hope. And, when you get right down to it, that’s a good start.’

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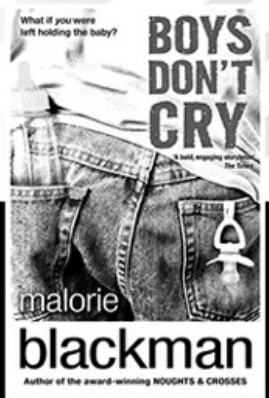

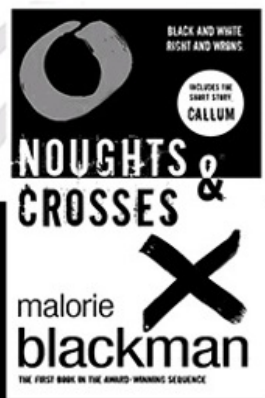

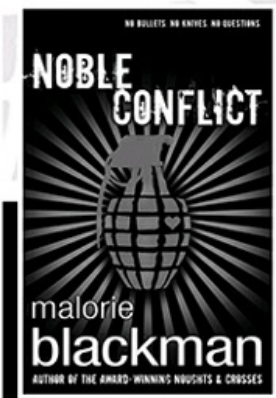

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